

Baptists provide Ukraine support

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (BP) — Hostilities between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists flared up again with a surprise attack on the eastern Ukrainian city of Mariupol, where Baptists are now busy providing shelter and repairs.

The rocket strike left 27 dead and 123 injured. Locals say in addition to the 13 buildings that suffered a direct hit, 73 blocks of apartment buildings were damaged and more than 100 cars were destroyed.

Both the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have expressed concern that a humanitarian crisis is looming in eastern Ukraine, due to both the escalation of fighting and harsh winter conditions.

The attack on Mariupol came on a day when one of the local Baptist churches was holding a conference for its members. Although

see UKRAINE on p. 9

PRESIDENT/CEO SAYS

Lifeway moving forward during 'strategic time'



NEW DIRECTION — Lifeway President and CEO Thom S. Rainer outlines a vision for the entity's future that will facilitate 'one Lifeway,' in a meeting with Lifeway trustees Feb. 2-3 in Nashville, Tn. (BP photo)

NASHVILLE (BP) — Lifeway Christian Resources will undergo organizational restructuring, leadership changes, and a probable relocation, president and CEO Thom S. Rainer outlined for trustees meeting Feb. 2-3 in Nashville.

"In 2015, we are moving forward in one of the most strategic times of change Lifeway has ever known," Rainer told trustees.

During his report, Rainer announced the combining of two divisions — Church Resources and B&H Publishing — into Lifeway Resources Division led by current vice president Eric Geiger. He noted that Lifeway historically has had three distinct market channels:

- Wholesale (B&H Publishing).
- Direct-to-Church (Church Resources).
- Retail (Lifeway Stores).

"In today's marketplace, those channels are blurred," Rainer said. "Combining the two publishing channels allows Lifeway to have a stronger presence in the Christian publishing market."

While Lifeway will continue to use the B&H imprint for its trade books, Rainer said it no longer

made sense to have two publishers. "The fusion of these two divisions will give us an incredible opportunity to lead with Lifeway. We believe this will make us a stronger entity and more appealing to prospective authors."

"We'll have one Lifeway, and we'll lead with Lifeway resources in our stores."

New VPs

The restructure includes creation of a new organizational development division that will focus on Lifeway's people strategies, culture development, and change management. Selma Wilson, former vice president of B&H and a Lifeway veteran of 20 years, was approved as vice president of the new division.

Trustees also elected Cossy Pachares as vice president of Lifeway's retail division. Pachares fills the role vacated by Tim Vineyard, who retired in January. Pachares is a 14-year Lifeway employee, most recently serving as associate vice president of B&H.

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Same sex marriage a reality in sister state

MONTGOMERY Ala. (BP) — What once read "bride and groom" on Alabama marriage licenses now reads "spouse and spouse."

Same sex marriage was made legal Feb. 9 after the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta did not issue an extended stay request from Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange's office over a recent ruling by U.S. District Judge Callie V.S. Granade.

Granade was nominated to the federal bench by U.S. President George W. Bush.

The state waited in anticipation to see if the U.S. Supreme Court would step in to

extend the stay, but the waiting ended in disappointment for those supportive of biblical marriage.

A similar case involving Mississippi's constitutional provision that mandates marriage must be between a man and a woman is pending before the Fifth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in New Orleans. A three-judge panel there heard oral arguments in January and is expected to issue their ruling at any time.

The U.S. Supreme Court announced Jan. 16 it would review separate lower-court

see ALABAMA on p. 8



HOLDING OUT HOPE — About 70 people, many among them Baptist, gather outside the Alabama State House in Montgomery on Feb. 6 for a prayer rally organized by Alabama Citizens Action Program, as the clock was running down on a stay of a federal judge's ruling that allowed same sex marriage in the state beginning Jan. 9. (BP photo courtesy of the Alabama Baptist)

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From the editor

WILLIAM PERKINS

Precious little heads

I was seated in a Mississippi Baptist church, a few minutes before the start of the worship service at which I had been invited to preach, when something quite ordinary occurred that moved me deeply.

It started when I heard a barely audible rustling and then excited whispers behind me. I turned around to see what was causing such a stir, and there at the back of the sanctuary was a proud grandfather holding his weeks-old grandchild.

It was obvious that this was the baby's first visit to Grandpa's church. As the pair made their way slowly down the center aisle in the time before the service started, pew after pew of people emptied to see the child. Other granddads congratulated the new granddad. Grandmothers beamed. Children stood on their tip-toes to get a better look at the baby.

Almost to a person, churchgoers in the sanctuary that day did something that I found as meaningful as it was commonplace. Everyone felt the need to gently cup their hand around the delicate top of the baby's head and hold it there for a little while. As soon as one hand was removed, another hand carefully fell into place on the baby's head. Some people lingered longer than others, but all felt the need to touch the child in that special way.

Although I have seen people do that all my life — and have done it myself more times than I can remember — this particular instance got me to thinking. Why do people cup their hands around a baby's head like that? Do we seek some supernatural experience? Are we attempting to impart our blessing to the child? Are we vicariously reliving our first days as a parent or grandparent?

Then it hit me. The explanation is as simple as the gesture itself. It is the power of new life. Human life does matter, after all. Everyone wanted to touch that baby because every life is important.

Even after five decades of the most intense cultural indoctrina-

tion on the complete irrelevance of individual human life and the "right" to rid ourselves of it as we choose, people still care. People still believe life is important. Even after being told over and over that what grows inside a mother is nothing more than a "product of conception," we know better.

We know better, but not because medical science has given us full-color, 4-D, real time video of children moving inside their mothers' wombs. We know better, but not because perfect, fully-formed "products of conception" are sometimes accidentally born alive during an abortion attempt.

We know better because we feel the power of new life deep inside our souls. We instinctively know what occurs at the instant of conception is God-breathed human life. We know that fact applies throughout all nine months of gestation. We know what is born at the end of nine months is human life.

If it's not human life, why must it be killed to prevent it from growing? Why do abortion supporters cynically refer to the growing child as a "fetus," while the rest of us know it is a baby? How much more out of touch can a person become? Of course it's a baby.

This week, for no other reason than my experience in that church on that Sunday, I will say a special prayer for all the babies who never had a chance to go to church with their grandfathers. I will pray for all the children who have been cheated of the thrill of catching their first frog, or hearing the unforgettable sound of a bat meeting ball for the first time.

I will pray for the grandfathers and grandmothers, and the fathers and mothers, whose arms ache to hold their missing children and grandchildren. I will pray this modern Holocaust will one day be seen for what it truly is.

Then I think I'll find a newborn child and, for a few fleeting moments, cup my hand around its precious little head.

Nurturing our small future

This may seem like a silly question, but do you know who Southern Baptists are?

When asked that question, many people will think in terms of our theology and doctrine. We believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. We are a people of the Book and, therefore, we read it, preach it, and seek to follow its teaching as we live our lives. We are theologically conservative and hold to a distinctive Baptist theology.

Another way to address the question is to look at our mission. Who are we in terms of what we do? We answered that question at the first meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1845. After voting to create the SBC, messengers also voted to create a Foreign Mission Board and a Board for Domestic Missions.

The glue that has always held us together is a common passion to call all the peoples of the world to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. The Great Commission is our DNA, literally. The glue that has always held us together — and formed the basis of unprecedented levels of cooperation between completely autonomous churches — is a common passion to call all the peoples of the world to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

More money is given to our mission enterprises by Southern Baptists than any other aspect of our work as a convention. We are a people determined to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Most of us know what we believe and most of us know what we do, but how many of us know who our churches are? We have 46,000-plus churches. What are those churches like?

If you imagine that the typical Southern Baptist church is a large church with extensive ministries, you would be incorrect. One of the most amazing truths about Southern Baptists is that we are a convention of smaller churches that work together to fund and operate large, extensive ministries on state, national, and global scales.

For instance, approximately 90% of all Southern Baptist churches have



Guest opinion
with Chuck Kelley

250 people or less attending worship on any given Sunday. Nearly 70% of all our cooperating churches have 100 or fewer in attendance each week. Less than two percent have more than 1,000 people present for Sunday worship.

Clearly, the Southern Baptist Convention is composed of far more smaller churches than larger churches. There are many important implications flowing from this truth about Southern Baptist churches.

Many of our pastors are bivocational pastors. They have both a secular career and a church ministry, often because the church they serve cannot afford to pay a full-time salary. If students are serving a church during seminary, it is nearly always a small church. When students go to serve a church after seminary, that church is often a smaller church, not a large church or megachurch. When we start new churches, they typically begin as small churches.

Research indicates churches with less than 1,000 people present on a Sunday morning give a higher percentage of their budget to the Cooperative Program than churches with more than 1,000 people.

In other words, smaller churches are the backbone of the Southern Baptist Convention. These churches are the source of our ministers, our missionaries, and much of our funding for the Cooperative Program.

Small is the new big. Our future will be determined by how well we nurture our small churches and enhance their fruitfulness.

Kelley is president of New Orleans Seminary. His commentary appears courtesy of Baptist Press.

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Immunization debate draws comments from Baptists

NASHVILLE (BP) — Amid controversy about the safety of using vaccines, Christians have found themselves discussing the scientific, public policy, and moral implications of immunizations.

Following a measles outbreak in Southern California and discussion of vaccinations by several potential 2016 presidential candidates, Southern Baptists' Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) in Nashville has published an article by a Christian pediatrician touting the safety and effectiveness of vaccinating children.

Meanwhile, the public policy aspect of vaccination discussions has centered on the question of whether governments should require all children to be vaccinated or allow conscientious objectors to opt out on religious and moral grounds. One homeschool advocacy group has withdrawn its support from a vaccination bill in the Mississippi legislature because lawmakers removed a provision allowing children to be exempt from immunizations based on the beliefs of their parents.

In yet another facet of the discussion, some vaccination opponents have raised concerns that many common vaccines were first developed using cell lines generated from tissues of aborted fetuses.

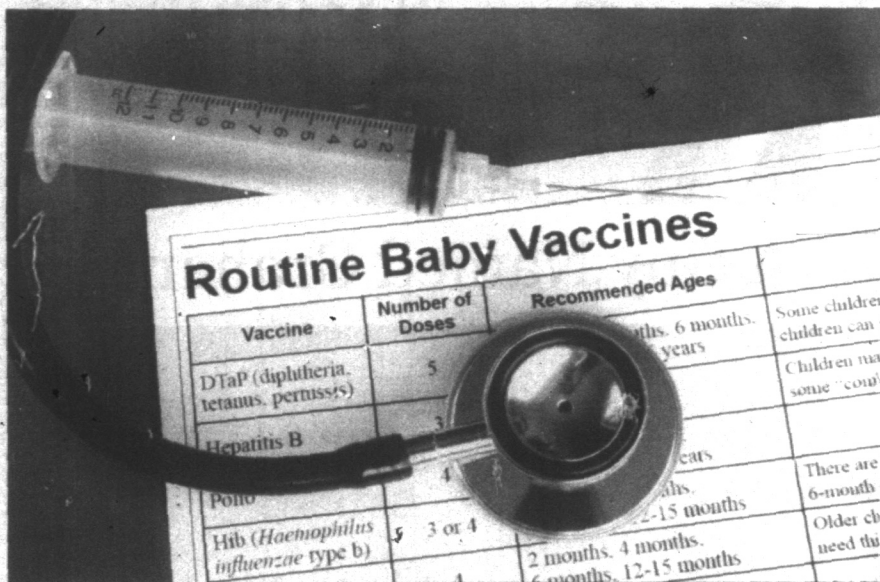
Should Christians vaccinate?

Writing for ERLC, pediatrician Justin Smith of Cook Children's Clinic in Lewisville, Texas, noted, "In my pediatric practice, questions about vaccines come up frequently. Your Facebook timeline, like mine, is often filled with vocal vaccine skeptics and critics who make us feel like we are in the minority opinion. So what is a Christian to do with vaccinations? I believe they should vaccinate and vaccinate with confidence."

Smith presented three reasons why he believes Christians should have their children vaccinated, countering the argument that potential side effects of immunization outweigh the benefits:

■ Christians should vaccinate because science confirms the effectiveness and safety of vaccinations. "The basic science of vaccines is sound and proven," Smith wrote. "They are chemicals that are found in nature. Your child will get more mercury from a tuna fish sandwich, more aluminum from breast milk or formula, and more formaldehyde from a pear than they will receive from vaccinations."

■ Christians should vaccinate because we love our neigh-



"We are our brother's keeper (Gen 4:9). Choosing not to vaccinate and to hide in the herd of everyone else who does, puts others unnecessarily at risk and, as we have seen these past few weeks, does not work. Vaccination is pro-life and pro-neighbor because it serves the public good."

Justin Smith
pediatrician



bors. "We are our brother's keeper (Gen 4:9)," Smith wrote. "Choosing not to vaccinate and to hide in the herd of everyone else who does, puts others unnecessarily at risk and, as we have seen these past few weeks, does not work. Vaccination is pro-life and pro-neighbor because it serves the public good."

■ Christians should vaccinate because we don't give in to fear mongering. Vaccine opponents sometimes exaggerate the potential side effects of shots and "play on our biggest fears as a parent, that we might do something that could harm our children," Smith wrote. "What they forget to mention is that by not vaccinating you are taking a bigger risk."

Debates about the scientific advisability of immunizations are not a recent phenomenon, dating back to at least 1721 when early New Englanders discussed whether they should be inoculated against smallpox amid an outbreak in Boston. New England Puritans were among those to debate whether inoculation was permitted by Scripture and medically advisable.

Preacher Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the most famous Puritan to promote smallpox inoculation, died from side effects of an inoculation in 1758.

Public policy

The Virginia-based Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) has not addressed the safety of vaccinations as much as other, related public policy issues — a component of the discussion not mentioned by the ERLC article. HSLDA believes that "lawmakers should take parental rights and public health into account when crafting laws that deal with immunizations," according to a statement on the HSLDA website.

HSLDA supported a bill that was being considered by the Mississippi state Senate, which would have "create[d] an exemption to vaccinations of school children based on the beliefs of their parents," the HSLDA website stated.

HSLDA withdrew its support when the House Education Committee amended the bill "to remove the language granting an exemption from the vaccinations based on a conscientious objection," HSLDA senior counsel Dewitt Black told Baptist Press (BP) in a written statement. "We are now only monitoring the bill's progress."

The revised House bill — which seeks to codify Mississippi's current practice of granting medical waivers to children whose doctors request them — awaits votes

by the full House and Senate, USA Today reported.

A similar bill being considered by the Colorado Senate would allow parents to choose whether to have their children immunized, USA Today reported.

The first state law regarding vaccinations was passed in Massachusetts in 1809, according to the HSLDA website. Many states passed compulsory vaccination laws around the turn of the 20th century, when immigration and disease outbreaks both increased.

In 1905, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that compulsory vaccination laws were constitutional.

Pro-life questions

A separate concern raised by some vaccination opponents is that many common vaccines are produced using cell lines originally developed from fetuses aborted in the 1960s and 1970s.

Among the vaccines prepared using cell lines developed from aborted babies are several rubella vaccines including versions of the combined measles, mumps, rubella shot; two vaccines against hepatitis A; a chicken pox vaccine; a rabies vaccine; and a smallpox vaccine, according to a 2005 report from the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life.

West Virginians for Vaccine Exemption is one group that cites pro-life concerns as part of its opposition to vaccines.

"West Virginians who object to abortion for religious or moral reasons have a right to refuse to inject abortion-related ingredients into their children," the group stated on its website according to Religion News Service.

However, Southern Baptist

bioethicist C. Ben Mitchell said it is not clear that recipients of a vaccine today are morally complicit in abortions that occurred decades ago.

"I admire Christians who are trying to avoid even the appearance of evil," Mitchell, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Union University in Union, Tn., told BP in written comments, "but it is very difficult to establish a clear line of complicity between an abortion 40 years ago and a vaccine administered in 2015."

"We should certainly be vigilant about resisting the temptation to do good through evil means, but we should nevertheless try to do good. This may be one of those issues where faithful Christians may disagree."

The Vatican report did make a distinction between cooperating in an immoral action while sharing evil intention, and doing so without sharing evil intention. The report also argued that the amount of time that elapses between the original abortions and the receipt of vaccines should be factored into moral deliberations.

"Doctors and fathers of families have a duty to take recourse to alternative vaccines (if they exist), putting pressure on the political authorities and health systems so that other vaccines without moral problems become available," the report stated. "They should take recourse, if necessary, to the use of conscientious objection with regard to the use of vaccines produced by means of cell lines of aborted human fetal origin."

The report added that "it is right to abstain from using" vaccines developed from cell lines derived from aborted fetuses "if it can be done without causing children, and indirectly the population as a whole, to undergo significant risks to their health. However, if the latter are exposed to considerable dangers to their health, vaccines with moral problems pertaining to them may also be used on a temporary basis."



MITCHELL

If you are a Mississippi Baptist and have never had the opportunity or taken the opportunity to hear Graham Smith sing or lead a choir or congregation in worship, you have missed a blessing. Even if you have not heard him sing, you have heard his name for all across our state and far beyond, he is indeed a legend. For over 50 years he has served churches across Mississippi as a dynamic and energetic worship leader. For almost half of those years he was the director of the Church Music Department of our state convention. If you missed hearing him, I am sorry. For now that voice is silent here on earth, but oh, what a treat you have ahead for you in heaven. I know that there will be great praise and worship in heaven. We will sing the new song. We will sing and praise the Lamb of God with new songs in unparalleled and unreserved worship. Still, while there will be great singers there it's hard to imagine that there are many people that God has made with the uniqueness, the voice, that Graham Smith possessed.

This guy named Graham was my friend and my life has always been blessed and bettered and enriched because I have known him. It was over 40 years ago that our lives and ministries began to be intertwined simply because God allowed me to be his grandmother's and his mother's and dad's pastor. I knew of Graham for he, even in those days, was almost an iconic figure among singers. But in the years that would follow, I grew to know him better and better as we in unusual and unique ways had opportunities to lead people in times of worship all across Mississippi and even to the ends of the earth.

Although I was not kin to the Smith clan I was privileged and blessed by his mom to be an honorary son. I'm not sure the date or even the place, but as time moved on, I became an adopted child in the Smith family. The blessings that followed were all mine. None of the blessings were more significant than the privilege that repeatedly and over the decades was mine to preach the word of God after Graham either sang or led a great choir in presenting the message of Jesus. Conducting a choir along with being given a voice that could sound like thunder, he was uniquely gifted musically and ministerially to touch lives. Whether speaking, singing or whispering, his voice resonated as though he was greater than life. I suppose the best description of his voice was, "It is indescribable." That being true, it was also true that he spent his entire life focused on and seeking to use all his gifts to point people to our wonderful Savior, Jesus.



A Guy Named Graham



But having been blessed by this great voice and using it for God's glory, whether singing a song or conducting a choir or leading a congregation to worship, he appeared to be bigger than life, but he indeed was not. He always viewed himself as an ordinary guy blessed with the opportunities to serve the Lord. He worked hard and lived out each day in gentle humility. He and his wife, Alice, were a great team of servants here in Mississippi for the 54 years they had together. His two children, Alicia and Louis, and their companions and their children are wonderful reflections of the goodness of God in a family and through them as they go on serving the Lord. But out of my privileged position, the seeing and hearing him through these many years, three glorious revelations portray his life.

First, he lived out a calling that came from God. Finishing high school down in Gulfport, he started out in college at Vanderbilt University planning to be a chemical engineer. While some of us may see that as a daunting task, he was fully capable of tackling that work, intellectually and every other way. But no, the God of heaven was at work in his heart and there was a different direction and a different chemistry that God would bring about in his life and He called him and Graham responded.

Secondly, I think about the unwavering fact that his music was always Christ honoring. He loved music and he loved the music that praised our God and exalted our Savior. Traditional music, he loved it, contemporary music that would honor the Lord, he loved it, but whatever he was leading or singing was an effort to bring people to see and hear of our wonderful Lord Jesus.

And the third magnificent thing that I would say about this guy named Graham is that his life matched his music. Singing the songs of Jesus, he walked with Jesus. He did not sing for music's sake and he did not live out his ministry simply because it was a job. His life was devoted to Christ Jesus. And all that he ever sang or lead others to sing, his life backed up with grace and mercy and purity and integrity. His life and his music were both driven by the same heartbeat — his love for God and his love for others. For all of us who knew this guy named Graham, we grieve our loss along with his family. But every one of us who knew this guy celebrate the blessing and the great honor that was ours to have known him.

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College News



Kendyll Covington was crowned as Miss MISSISSIPPI COLLEGE Jan. 29. The 19-year-old sophomore from Pelham, Ala., is a musical theater major and received a \$2000 scholarship and a prize package from local businesses. She is shown being crowned by 2014 Miss Mississippi College, Callie Shirley.



A women's testimony night was held at WILLIAM CAREY UNIVERSITY on January 29 with over 150 female students in attendance. Three Carey students and a 2014 alumna shared their testimonies. Other activities included door prizes, desserts and worship through music. Pictured at the event are (from left to right) Meg Edney of Vicksburg; Macie Foreman of Rayne, La.; Nicole Yates of Lucedale; Ashley Huntington of Slidell, La.; Brooke Morgan of Hickory; and Lana Pol of Pascagoula.

Meeting registration opens for children, youth

COLOMBUS, Oh. (BP) — Registration is open for preschool childcare, Giant Cow Children's Ministries, Children in Action Missions Camp, and Youth on Mission in conjunction with the Southern Baptist Convention's 2015 annual meeting June 16-17 in Columbus, Oh.

Southern Baptist Disaster Relief childcare volunteers will care for preschoolers and the Giant Cow Children's Ministries (formerly Children's Conferences International), while Woman's Missionary Union will guide the Children in Action Missions Camp and Youth on Mission curricula and activities.

Preschool childcare and activities for children who have completed grades one through six will be held at the Greater Columbus Convention Center, the annual meeting site. Youth who have completed grades seven through 12 will worship each morning at the convention center before going into the community for hands-on mission projects.

Pre-registration is required and available online at sbcanualmeeting.net, under the "Children/Youth" tab. Early registration is encouraged, as space is limited. No onsite registration will be accepted.

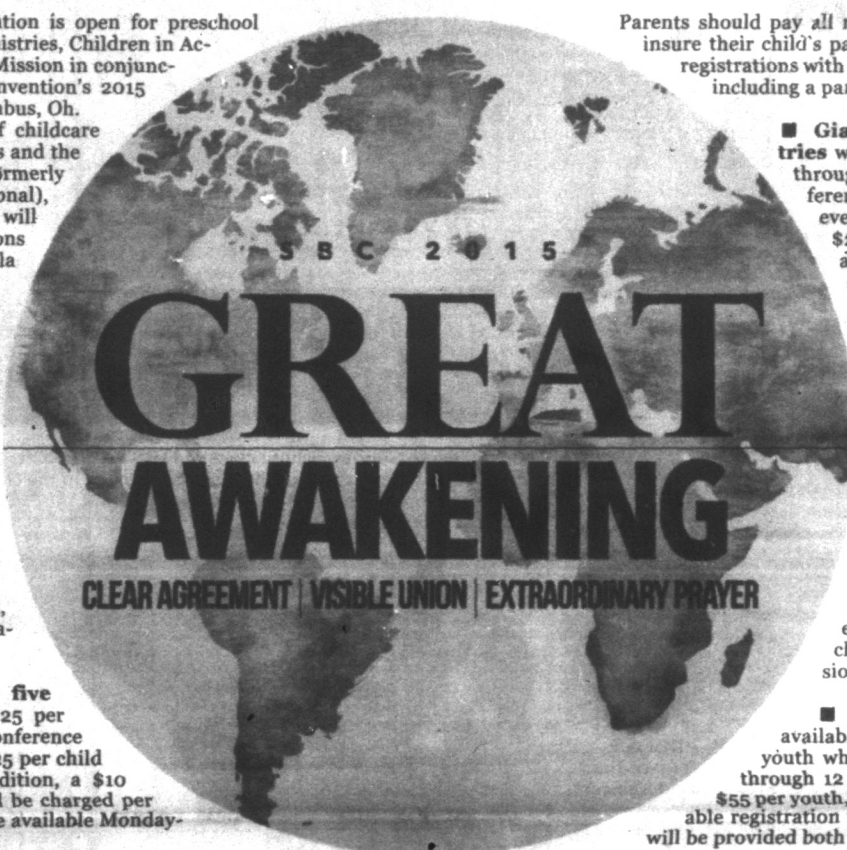
■ **Newborns through age five** childcare will be available for \$25 per child during the SBC Pastors' Conference on June 14-15, and an additional \$25 per child during the annual meeting. In addition, a \$10 non-refundable registration fee will be charged per child. Lunch for preschoolers will be available Monday-Wednesday for six dollars per meal.

Parents should pay all related fees when registering to insure their child's participation. The SBC will verify registrations with an emailed confirmation packet, including a parent's handbook.

■ **Giant Cow Children's Ministries** will minister to children ages six through 12 during the Pastors' Conference at a cost of \$32 for Sunday evening and Monday combined, or \$27 for Monday only. Registration at the door will be \$35 for both days, or \$30 for Monday only. Registration is open at thegiantcow.com/#1sbc2015pre/c1grq.

■ **Children in Action Missions Camp** will be offered Tuesday and Wednesday for children who have completed grades one through six by May/June 2015. The cost is \$40 per child, in addition to a \$10 non-refundable registration fee per child. No lunch, only snacks, will be provided. Parents will need to pick up their children both days at the conclusion of the morning session.

■ **Youth on Mission** will be available Tuesday and Wednesday to youth who have completed grades seven through 12 by May/June 2015. The cost is \$55 per youth, in addition to a \$10 non-refundable registration fee per youth. Lunch and snacks will be provided both days.



Movement noted in attempts to have pastor released

WASHINGTON (BP) — The Obama administration has renewed its call for the release of imprisoned pastor Saeed Abedini. Meanwhile, the pastor has sent a letter thanking the president for visiting his family in Idaho, the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) reported.

ACLJ is providing legal representation for Abedini and his family.

"We again call on Iran to release Mr. Abedini so that he may be reunited with his family," the ACLJ quoted National Security Council spokesperson Bernadette Meehan as saying.

"We remain concerned about the health and welfare of Mr. Abedini, sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran on charges related to his religious beliefs," Meehan said, "and we repeat our request for Iran to grant Swiss officials, who serve as our protecting power, consular access to determine his well-being."

The renewed call came Jan. 29, about the time President Obama received a letter from

"President Obama, you have my prayers from inside of these walls. I pray for God's guidance, wisdom, and blessing for you as you lead this great nation. God Bless you and your family and God Bless America!"

Saeed Abedini
imprisoned pastor



Abedini thanking the president for meeting with Abedini's wife Naghmeh and their two children in Boise, Idaho, on Jan. 21.

The U.S. State Department has also arranged for Naghmeh Abedini to travel to Washington in February to meet David Saperstein, U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, to discuss efforts to free the pastor. "There is activity going on in trying to bring him home," Naghmeh Abedini said in an interview with KIVI-TV near Boise.

In his letter posted on the

ACLJ website, Saeed Abedini thanked Obama for seeking his release. "I was personally encouraged that you were in my hometown of Boise, Idaho and made time to visit my wife and children. They have had a heavy burden to carry in my absence, and your presence helped to relieve some of that burden."

"Thank you for your fatherly compassion of letting Jacob know that you will try to get me home by his birthday [in March]. I know that as a father you can truly understand the pain and anguish of my children living without their

father and the burden that is on my wife as a single mother."

"I also know how encouraged Christians around the world were to also hear of this meeting. Nothing is more valuable to the body of Christ than to see how the Lord is in control and moves ahead of countries and leadership through united prayer."

Abedini also offered prayer for the president's well-being. "President Obama, you have my prayers from inside of these walls. I pray for God's guidance, wisdom, and blessing for you as you lead this great nation. God Bless you

and your family and God Bless America!"

The letter was mailed by Abedini's father in Iran, who obtained the letter during a 20-minute meeting with his son that is allowed each week at Rajaei Shahr prison in Karaj, Iran, Naghmeh Abedini said on Facebook.

Saeed Abedini's father said his son's health is poor, the ACLJ reported. "Pastor Saeed's stomach pain — lingering injuries from prison beatings — remains a concern. Pastor Saeed expressed increased amounts of pain. He has still not received the critical medical attention he needs in a private hospital. He needs surgery."

Saeed Abedini has been imprisoned since Sept. 26, 2012, because of his Christian faith. He was sentenced Jan. 27, 2013, to eight years in prison on charges he threatened national security by planting house churches in his native Iran years earlier. He had been under house arrest since July, 2012.

Just for the Record



ARLINGTON CHURCH, BEAUMONT, ordained three deacons Oct. 26, 2014, followed by a reception. Shown are pastor Greg Piercy, Josh Lott, Jeff Windham, and Lance Wells.



The Women on Mission, **CALVARY CHURCH, PIKE ASSOCIATION**, thank those who helped the church reach their Lottie Moon Christmas Offering goal of \$1350. David Millican, interim pastor; Bobbie Dunaway, W.O.M. director.



SOUTH NETTLETON CHURCH, NETTLETON, awarded Peggy Smith a plaque for 19 years service as church treasurer Jan. 25. Shown are Lori Hale, Smith, John Smith, and Johnny Hale.



NEW HOME CHURCH, SMITH COUNTY, Bible drillers Hunter McCrory and Tori Tucker celebrated learning milestones at Plaid Rhino in Hattiesburg with pastor Charles Welch. They will begin drills in the spring.



The Friendship Sunday School class of **FIRST CHURCH, OXFORD**, held their Christmas social at Emeritus of Oxford. The class is involved in the church, community, and missions, and has ministered through clean water missions, interfaith missions, coats, food, backpacks for children, and other projects.



FIRST CHURCH, PEARL, honored Clyde and Maud Blount (ages 92 and 95, respectively) for having taught Sunday School in Mississippi churches for 100+ years. The couple were presented with a plaque commemorating their service. The couple had taught the oldest men's and oldest women's Sunday School classes before having to step down. Scott Crawford, pastor.

In other Church News:

➤ **First Church, Bruce**, will host a ladies' conference Mar. 6 - 7. Fri., 7 p.m.; Sat., 9:30 a.m., followed by lunch. Leah Richardson, speaker; Janae Harrelson Winter, music; tickets, \$10, available by calling the church at (662) 983-2218 by Feb. 25.

➤ **Jerusalem Church, Attala County**, will honor Johnny Parks and his wife Olene with a retirement reception at the church Feb. 15, 2-4 p.m. Parks has been preaching since 1960, with almost 20 years at Jerusalem Church.



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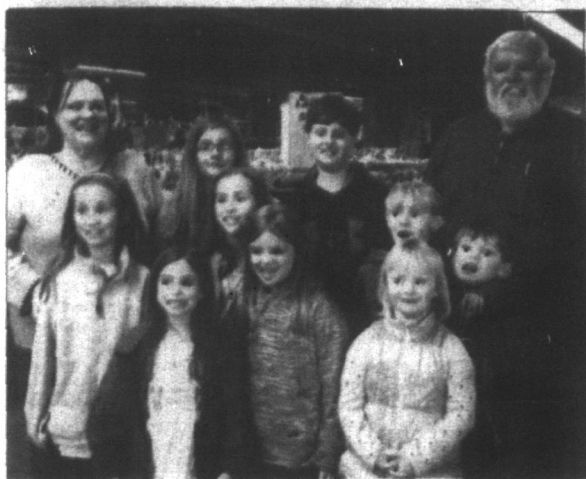
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Just for the Record



The Children in Action of **PROVIDENCE CHURCH, CARR-ROLLTON**, helped out at Mission Hope in Winona Jan. 23. They sorted shoes, hung clothes, and collected empty hangers.



NEW HOME CHURCH, SMITH COUNTY, held pastor appreciation for pastor Charles Welch in September, 2014.



POPLAR SPRINGS CHURCH, GOLDEN, ordained Kelly Wayne Knight as a pastor-teacher Jan. 25. Shown are pastor Jimmy Dale Sartin and Knight.

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WEST ELLISVILLE CHURCH, ELLISVILLE, honored Wayne Valentine for 41 years of deacon service Jan. 18. He is shown with his wife Jeanette and deacon chairman Joey Bradshaw.

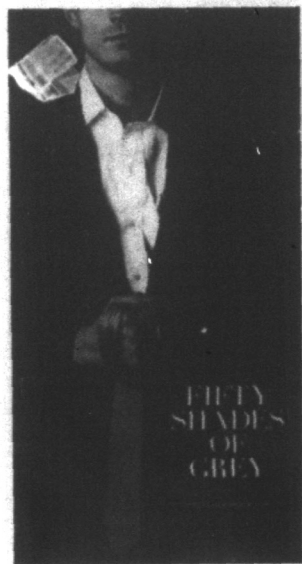


JUNIPER GROVE CHURCH, POPLARVILLE, ordained Curt Rester as deacon Nov. 30, 2014. Shown are pastor Breaux Tagueant and Rester.



The Kids Choir of **VALLEY GROVE CHURCH, PONTOTOC**, preformed their Christmas musical, Back to the Manger, Dec. 14.

Interfaith leaders urge avoiding 'Fifty Shades of Grey'



NASHVILLE (BP) — The upcoming movie, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, offers no benefit to the Christian life and should be avoided by followers of Christ, according to Jay Dennis, pastor of First Church at the Mall in Lakeland, FL, and founder of the One Million Men anti-pornography ministry.

The best-selling book trilogy, which also includes *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*, was originally aimed at a female audience. The marketing of this movie by mainstream media is leading to the normalization of pornography. Make no mistake, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is pornography," said Dennis.

"There is absolutely nothing good that could come from exposing your mind to that which will lead to sinful sexual thoughts and temptations. This is not something where you go see the movie for fun or to see what all the rage is about."

The interfaith Religious Alliance Against Pornography (RAAP) is encouraging Christians to instead see *Old Fashioned*, a movie highlighting the values of love in 1 Corinthians 13, in stark contrast to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

RAAP, composed of Protestants, Catholics, Muslim, and Jewish representatives, has asked faith leaders to speak against the movie and warn the public of its harm. "The books and the movie undermine everything that we believe as members of the faith community," RAAP said in a written statement signed by 29 leaders, though none of them appear to be Southern Baptist.

"As members of the faith community we need to inform our constituencies about the destructive message of this movie and to highlight the beauty of God's design for loving relationships between a

husband and wife in the covenant of marriage."

RAAP encourages leaders to work at the grassroots level to discourage viewing of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. "It is critically important not simply to condemn the message of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It is equally important to celebrate our message about love and the blessing of sexual intimacy within the bonds of marriage. We have the better story; let's proclaim it."

Dennis, who preached a sermon in 2012 entitled, "50 Reasons Christian Women Shouldn't Read 'Fifty Shades of Grey,'" told Baptist Press the movie is subversive and just as harmful to men as to women.

"A Christian man or woman attending this movie is placing their witness, testimony, and reputation on the altar of political correctness," he said. "I read recently where this movie

will virtually make this kind of sinful sexual involvement no longer a taboo. Who would have ever thought that bondage and sadomasochism in our society would be normalized even by those who profess to know Jesus?"

Seeing the movie gives it a stamp of approval it doesn't deserve, Dennis said. "One cannot maintain a testimony of godliness, Christ likeness..., and view this movie too. A choice must be made and a powerful statement must be given through a Christian man or woman's avoidance of the movie and speaking out against the movie."

"Satan often uses curiosity to entrap Christians into making provision for the flesh. Can you see the movie and claim to be godly? I believe the answer is a huge 'No.' It is time for pastors and Christian leaders to stand up and speak out and declare 'this is wrong!'"

ALABAMA

cont. from p. 1

decisions on same sex marriage from Michigan, Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee, signaling it likely will determine by late June whether states can define marriage as only between a man and a woman. The top court's ruling would apply nationwide.

The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (ABSB) voted unanimously at its Feb. 6 meeting to "express moral outrage, intense grief and strong disagreement over court rulings that have set our culture in a direction against the biblical definition of marriage" in its Resolution on Reaffirmation of Biblical Marriage.

Rick Lance, ABSB executive director, said in a video statement released Feb. 4, "Now more than ever we need to commit ourselves to praying for spiritual and moral awakening in our land. In the course of history Christians have often been at their best when they were opposed by government and culture."

The board encouraged all churches to be wise about preparing their bylaws and policies and released a Christian Response Task Force report designed to "help autonomous Baptist churches think through vital issues and formulate their own internal policies."

The report listed options a Baptist church may use to "protect its biblical values," including a potential marriage statement: "We believe that marriage is a union between one man and one woman, following biblical principles (Gen. 2:19-24, Lev. 18:22, Matt. 19:4-6, Rom. 1:18-27, Eph. 5:22-33, Heb. 13:4). We believe that God sanctions

only the union in marriage of a man to a woman. Therefore, this church recognizes only a wedding compatible with those standards."

The report concluded with a call for God's people to be "salt and light transforming the culture while not being conformed to (it)."

"Let us be true to our Lord and His Word while showing compassion and care to those for whom He died. Let us speak and practice the truth in love to the glory of the Lord and to the health of His Church" the report said.

Although probate judges are now required to issue same sex marriage licenses, several Alabama counties said they will no longer perform wedding ceremonies, citing potential office confusion and increased workload, according to news reports.

Chilton County Probate Judge Bobby Martin said probate judges will no longer be required to perform wedding ceremonies because of a section of Alabama law code that says marriages "may be" solemnized by any licensed minister, active or retired judge, circuit court or district court. The "may be" statement releases officials from the idea of being "required to."

For supporters of same sex marriage, Feb. 9 and the days leading up to it were considered a big victory. Benjamin Cooper, chairman of Equality Alabama, said, "We anticipated this. We are overjoyed and thrilled and really proud of our federal court."

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NORTH WINONA BAPTIST CHURCH IN WINONA, MS IS ACCEPTING RESUMES FOR THE POSITION OF MINISTER OF MUSIC: Please send resume to 602 Alberta Drive, Winona, MS 38967, or email to mwbcmoffice@att.net

SPRING HILL BAPTIST CHURCH OF WATERFORD, MS: In search for a Husband and Wife to work with youth and children in the church. Contact by phone at 662-252-5131 (Leave Message if no answer) or Mail resume to PO Box 60, Waterford, MS 38685

BETHEL BAPTIST CHURCH, A SMALL COUNTRY CHURCH BETWEEN DREW AND RULEVILLE, MISS., IS ACCEPTING RESUMES FOR THE POSITION OF BI-VOCATIONAL PASTOR: 1 April 2015. Please send resumes to P.O. Box 249, Drew, Miss. 38737.

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PART-TIME YOUTH MINISTER NEEDED AT NEW SIGHT BAPTIST CHURCH: Please send resumes to: Youth Minister Search Committee 629 Forest Trail NE, Brookhaven, MS, 39601

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PART-TIME MUSIC MINISTER: First Baptist Church of Red Bay, Alabama is seeking a Part-Time Music Minister. Send resume to: First Baptist Church, c/o: Music Minister Search Committee, P.O. Box 616, Red Bay, AL 35582, (256) 356-9505

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BTWL ARH: SKFNI-SKTF

Clue: N = T

Have fun with cryptography and exercise your Bible knowledge. A King James Version Bible verse has been encoded by letter substitution. The same letter is substituted throughout the puzzle. Solve by trial and error. Answer to last week's puzzle: Matthew 22:32

By Charles Marx, 1932-2004, © 2005

UKRAINE

cont. from p. 1

the church building is located where much of the shelling took place, it was not damaged. By noon, church members had helped to assess nearby damage and opened their doors to house up to 100 victims of the barrage.

An International Mission Board (IMB) worker is helping pastors from this region and is coordinating with the church to provide cleanup and restoration to apartment buildings that were damaged in the attack. The worker described Pastor Alexander (name changed), the 73-year-old Ukrainian Baptist pastor, as his hero.

"Since the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine his church has been working to provide medicine, food, and other relief to other areas that have come under attack," the worker said. "Now, with his own city under direct attack, he is organizing the Baptist youth of Mariupol to go into the bombed neighborhoods of their city to clean up and put plastic over broken and shattered windows to keep out the cold."

"This will help people not only rebuild their homes, but to help them rebuild their lives on a solid biblical foundation. As we bring physical materials, it is our hope that God will open doors in order to speak about spiritual needs in everyday life. Then there truly will be rebirth in every sense."

International Mission Board (IMB) worker

The worker noted it will take months to replace all the windows in the affected area. He said an IMB project, Rebirth: Eastern Ukraine, has been established so people can give directly to the efforts to help families recover from the effects of the attacks.

This project specifically helps to provide building materials to complete basic home repairs, like windows and doors, for bombed apartment buildings and houses. Believers will work alongside homeowners, providing a Christian witness as they spend time with them, the worker said.

"This will help people not only rebuild their homes, but to help them rebuild their lives on a solid biblical foundation," he said. "As we bring physical materials, it is our hope that God will open doors in order to speak about spiritual needs in everyday life. Then there truly will be rebirth in every sense."

IMB has asked for prayer for Christian workers in the area as they seek ways to help and minister to those caught in the conflict. Pray for a resolution to the crisis in Ukraine. Pray that lives will be changed, and that people will repent and be saved as a result of Christian witness during the time of war.

For more information on Rebirth: Eastern Ukraine, visit facebook.com/RebirthEUA or send questions to rebirtheasternukraine@gmail.com.

Submission Guidelines

The Baptist Record is pleased to publish news and photographs of special events that take place in cooperating churches of the Mississippi Baptist Convention. News items and/or photographs depicting benefits and activities for secular or outside organizations will not be published.

Preferred method: news may be submitted electronically to the e-mail address below, and must be included in the message segment of an e-mail form. Secondary method: news may be typewritten or neatly printed on 8 1/2 by 11-inch paper and mailed. All articles must be received in writing; no articles will be accepted over the telephone. Due to ever-present virus threats, no text attachments will be accepted. Photograph attachments in JPEG format are permissible.

Please make articles concise. Include the who, what, when, where details of the story, along with a contact person's address and telephone number.

Photographs must be submitted electronically via e-mail, as attachments in JPEG format. Hard copy photographs mailed through the postal service will not be accepted. Photographs must be clear, sharp, and well-lit. Photographs must depict people. No landscape, building, or object-only photographs will be printed. Photographs containing inappropriate gestures and objectionable clothing will not be published. Cell phone photographs and other low resolution items that do not reproduce well on newsprint are generally not publishable.

There is no guarantee that news items and/or photographs will be published, and unsolicited material will not be acknowledged or returned. All news items are subject to editing, and all photographs are subject to cropping. News items and/or photographs can be published one time only. Deadline for submitting news is one week prior to requested publication date. Articles that are not date-sensitive will be published on a space-available basis. These guidelines are not meant to be exhaustive.

Submit news to The Baptist Record, P.O. Box 530, Jackson, MS 39205-0530. FAX: (601) 292-3330. E-mail: baptistrecord@mbcb.org.

LIFEWAY

cont. from p. 1

Authority to sell

Trustees also voted to authorize LifeWay's administration "to sell the Nashville campus or a portion of the campus; for a price that is within or exceeds the property valuation range determined" by a leading commercial real estate broker.

The motion also stipulated

the sale "would allow LifeWay to build a new facility designed specifically for its ministries now and in the future."



WILSON

Rainer said multiple offers to buy the property are being closely reviewed, clarified and analyzed. "We are in the middle of



PACHARES

negotiations to get what is best for LifeWay's future. We need

to move forward in a way that is the best stewardship of what God has given to us."

Southern Baptist Convention President Ronnie Floyd, senior pastor of Cross Church in northwestern Arkansas, told trustees, "You are in a moment when you can lead forth with vision, authority and passion and do something that will encourage the heart of this convention greatly. The future is extremely bright."

Truth is not relative.

Find it in the One who is the way, truth, and life.

Simply share the following prayer with God in your own words:

1. Lord, I admit that I need you. (I have sinned.)
2. I want forgiveness for my sins and freedom from eternal death. (I repent.)
3. I believe Jesus died and rose from the grave to forgive my sins and to restore my relationship with you. (I believe in Jesus.)
4. By faith, I invite Jesus Christ into my life.

From this time on, I want to live in a loving relationship with Him. (I receive Christ as my Savior and Lord.)

"But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name." (John 1:12)

If you make a decision for Christ today, contact a local Southern Baptist church for spiritual guidance.

THE VILLAGE VIEW



Dr. Rory Lee, Executive Director

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GIFTS OF HONOR AND MEMORY

A portion of The Village View is allocated each month to a list of Gifts of Honor and Memory. Many groups and individuals elect to pay tribute to others through this sensitive, meaningful, and helpful medium. This feature is hopefully designed to further honor, with taste and respect, those who are and have been special to our special friends.

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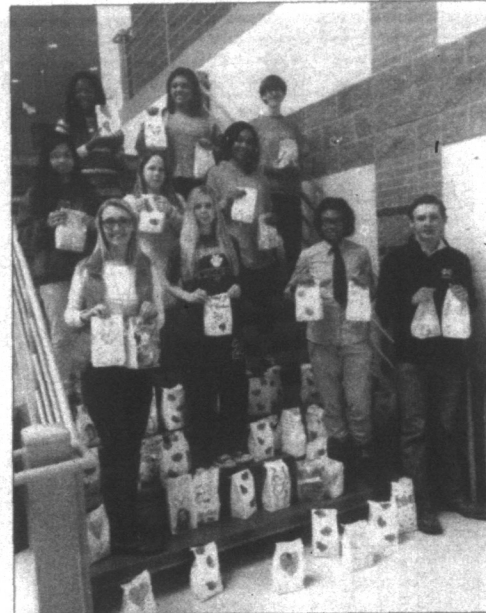
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The students of the Madison Central High School Interact Club provided Valentine goodie bags for the residents on all seven campuses of The Baptist Children's Village.

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Mr. & Mrs. Gino Gianfrancesco
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Lydia SSC, FBC Soso
Mr. Tommy Verdell
Mr. & Mrs. Perry E. Atherton
Lynn Wagner
FBC Newton
Mrs. Hugh Walker
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DECEMBER 1-15, 2014

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Return to the Restoring God • Nehemiah 9:32-37

Introduction

"Intimacy" is a "state of being intimate," "marked by very close association, contact, or familiarity" (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). Jesus, in John 15, used a metaphor to depict it: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit" (v. 5, NASB).

Since the beginning, God has desired that kind of relationship with people. Adam and Eve, therefore, knew "the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden" (Gen. 3:8, NASB) until they sinned. Separation, a consequence of sin, ended their fellowship and, tragically, their kin began life as spiritual outsiders (Rom. 5:12-21).

To reestablish intimacy, the Son of God became "the Lamb of God who [took] away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29, NASB). Jesus is the only way back to God (Jn. 14:6; 2 Cor. 5:17-19; Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Pet. 3:18).

"Remaining" (NIV, HCSB) or "abiding" with God is the reason to return to him. To remain, however, is harder because it demands holiness every day (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

Remaining or abiding with God would have been easier in Eden. This world is a hostile place where sin "so easily entangles" (Heb. 12:1, NASB). Hence, to be holy now requires extra effort; a greater need for the "spiritual disciplines," that which Donald Whitney defined as "habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times" (Spiritual Dis-

ciplines for the Christian Life). Richard Foster added, "The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing" (Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth).

Whitney profiled nine spiritual disciplines: prayer; worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling and learning. Foster profiled twelve, six of which do not appear in Whitney's book: meditation, simplicity, submission, confession, guidance, and celebration.

Commentary

Chapters 7-10 record the spiritual return of the wayward Jews: [a] Reading of the Law (8:1-12), [b] Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18), and [c] Public Confession of Sin (9:1-10:39). Each event occurred in the seventh month (7:7; 8:2, 14; 9:1).

Month 7: Days 15-22

The Feast of Tabernacles, also called "Booths" (Hebrew: Sukkot) ended with a

"solemn assembly" (8:18; see also 2 Chr. 7:9; Isa. 1:13; Joel 1:14; 2:15). It is one of three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Dt. 16:13-17) and lasts a full week (Lev. 23:33-36).

Month 7: Day 24

Apparently, the Jews in Judah did not observe the Day of Atonement (Hebrew: Yom Kippur), an annual event that occurs

on day 10 (Lev. 16:29-34; 23:26-32). What happened on day 24, however, seems similar to it: "The sons of Israel assembled

with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. . . stood and confessed their sins" (9:1, 2). Three spiritual disciplines, in addition to fasting, played key roles at that gathering: solitude (9:2, "Israel separated themselves from all foreigners," NASB), confession, and worship.

The Hebrew verb, translated "confess" literally means "to show or point out with the hand extended" (Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament). Grammatically, each form is an intensive reflexive (v. 2: "they themselves confessed," v. 3: "themselves confessing").

a. Extent of the Confession

The Jews in Judah confessed their sins as well as their fathers' sins (see 1:4-11; Ezra 9:5-15; and Dan. 9:1-19 for comparable confessions). Such guilt would not be voiced today. Individualism now overshadows community and generational connections.

b. Content of the Confession

To express their failings in spite of God's faithfulness, the Jews in Judah recited their history (mostly a tragedy): Abraham (vv. 7-8), exodus (vv. 9-11), wilderness period (vv. 12-22), conquest of Canaan (vv. 23-25), and the rule of judges and kings (vv. 26-37). A summary of Israel's history also appears in Psalms (78:105, and 136) and Acts (chaps. 6-7).

Conclusion

Robert Robinson penned the lyrics, "O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be! Let thy grace, Lord, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above" (Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing).

You and I deserve the biblical comparison to sheep; we tend to stray (Ps. 119:175; Isa. 53:6; Jer.

Parke is professor, Department of Christian Studies and Philosophy, Mississippi College, and a member of Morrison Heights Church, Clinton.



Explore the Bible
with Ivan Parke

Straight Talk on Human Depravity • Romans 1:18-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

God's Word is about transforming people's lives. Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, apostle, preacher of the Gospel, and missionary to the Gentiles, wrote the book of Romans. Centuries later in 1515, Martin Luther was preparing to teach his students the book of Romans. As he studied the ancient manuscript of Augustine (AD 386) he came to understand the righteousness God freely gives to those who put their trust in Christ. Then on May 24, 1738, John Wesley heard a message from the preface of Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Romans and came to genuine faith. This epistle, through the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to transform and teach us today. It would behoove the student to study this book in greater depth to develop a solid Biblical worldview.

Romans 1:17 is the theme verse for this epistle. Therefore what Paul writes throughout this letter is further explanation regarding the righteousness of God. Verse 18 is abrupt, "For the wrath of God." "If people were sensitive to the manifestation of God's anger toward them, they would be so moved by enlightened self-interest that they would flee as fast as they could to hear the Gospel, but their hearts have become so hardened, their hearts so calcified, that they have no fear of God. People do not

believe in God's wrath; they think he is incapable of it."¹ There is no fear. The wrath of God is against the sin of those "who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." Mankind has taken the truth of God and pressed it down into their subconscious—it is out of their mind, they want no part of it. Yet the truth is revealed plainly (vs. 19) and God has shown it through "his invisible attributes . . . his eternal power and divine nature revealed in nature . . . since the creation of the world." Every person who has, who is, and who will walk this earth

"knows of God and clearly perceives God but rejects that knowledge. For that, every person is exposed to the wrath of God."¹ "So they are without excuse" (vs. 20). Scripture is clear, we have become "futile in our thinking and our foolish hearts are darkened" (vs. 23). The truth: our sin will receive God's wrath because it is a rejection of Him.

Some commentators believe Romans 1:22-32 is one of the grimmest passages throughout all of Scripture. The phrase, "given up" is used three times in this section (vss. 24, 26, 28). God says he will not strive with mankind forever (Genesis 6:3) and there is a time when God stops being gracious to His people and turns them over to their sin (Book of Jeremiah). "Many times, if not most times, the sin we

commit is a punishment for sin. When we sin, we are actually working out God's punishment for our sin. . . God gives

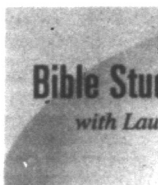
us over to our sinful impulses. We become slaves to the things we want to do. . . When the apostle Paul describes the radical corruption of the human race, he sees the sin of homosexual behavior as the sin most representative of the radical nature of our fall. It is seen here not simply as a sin, nor even as a serious sin or a gross sin, but as the clearest expression of the depths of our

perversity."¹ There will be "the due penalty for their error" when people choose to go against God's written law and the law of nature. Verse 28 states, "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." What is a debased mind? One filled with impurities and desires of the flesh, it loves the lie and flees from the truth. The truth: homosexual sin is one example of our rebellion against God.

"Or do you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: . . . And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9a, 11). The truth: all people, regardless of their sins, can be made new in Christ. Follow the Roman Road: Romans 3:23; 5:8; 6:23; 10:9-10; and 10:13. Daily, "The righteous shall live by faith," this is the beginning of the sanctification process.

¹ Romans, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, by R. C. Sproul, ©2009, Crossway

Leathers is a member of First Church, Madison.



Bible Studies for Life
with Laura Leathers



covered dish lunch; Tony Martin, speaker; Allen Harris, music; George Johnson, pastor.

► **Shady Grove Church, Lucedale:** Revival, Feb. 22 - 25; Sun., 11 a.m., followed by covered dish meal and 6 p.m.;

Mon. - Wed., 11 a.m., soup and sandwich lunch (bring a dessert) and 7 p.m.; Bob Pitman, speaker; Neal Wallace, music. ► **New Ireland Church, Union:** Revival, Feb. 15 - 18; Sun., 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.; Mon. - Wed.,

6 p.m.; Trent Jaudon, speaker; Thomas Fortenberry, pastor. ► **Enon Church, Batesville:** Revival, Feb. 22-25; Sun., 10:30 a.m. and 6 p.m.; Mon. - Wed., 7 p.m.; James Messer, speaker; Keith Bolen, pastor.

Revivals & Homecomings

► **Valley Park Church, Valley Park:** Revival, Feb. 22-25; Sun., 11 a.m. and 6 p.m.; Mon. - Wed., 7 p.m.; Ken Rhodes,

speaker; Billy Ray, music. ► **First Church, Belzoni:** 129th anniversary/homecoming, Mar. 1; service, 10 a.m., followed by

Persecution chases Protestants from Mexican village

AUSTIN, Texas (BP) — In one of at least three instances of persecution of evangelical Christians in southern Mexico's Chiapas state last month, village leaders reneged on their agreement to allow 47 evangelicals who were expelled for their faith to return to their homes and land.

In accordance with the agreement arranged by state officials, Protestants from Buenavista Bahuitz village on Jan. 20 tried to return to their community after syncretistic Catholics expelled them in 2012 for their faith.

Syncretism, as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, is "the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief... and usually results in a new teaching or belief system."

Catholics of the village who practice a blend of Roman Catholicism and indigenous customs involving drunken festivals have been at odds with the Protestant minority for years. Local authorities who are syncretistic Catholics told them they could come back to their property only if they became Catholic and took part in their religious activities, including paying for the costly celebrations that involve consuming large amounts of alcohol.

When the Protestants and Chiapas officials accompanying them reached Buenavista Bahuitz, community leaders again refused entry until the Protestants convert to Catholicism, according to advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

In November those expelled from Buenavista Bahuitz, together with other forcibly displaced Protestants from other Chiapas communities, protested their plight with a peaceful sit-in at the state government

building in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital. After state government officials gave the Protestants verbal commitments to address their concerns, the displaced ended their month-long action on Dec. 1.

Chiapas officials had assured the displaced group that they had negotiated their return, said Luis Herrera, director of the Coordination of Christian Organizations of Chiapas (COOC), in a CSW statement. The officials had told these evangelical Christians their freedom of religion would be protected.

However, when the evangelicals and state officials arrived in the village by bus Jan. 20, Buenavista Bahuitz leaders told the former residents that they must convert to Catholicism in order to stay. When surprised state officials then intervened with the village leaders, the syncretistic Catholics at last offered to allow the evangelicals to stay if they paid a high fine.

The evangelicals declined the offer. They returned to church property in Comitán de Domínguez, where they've lived as displaced persons for two and half years.

Also in Chiapas, on Jan. 8 about 25 armed, hooded individuals believed to be cacos (local political leaders) reportedly attacked evangelicals in Las Ollas community in San Juan Chamula municipality for refusing to take part in a Virgin of Guadalupe festival in December.

Although they objected to the drunken festival on principle, the impoverished evangelicals reportedly said they were willing to pay but simply could not afford the 250 pesos (US\$16) per family that village leaders demanded of them.



NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST — U.S. President Barack Obama addresses the National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 5 in Washington, D.C. (Photo courtesy of The White House)

President draws fire for prayer breakfast remark

WASHINGTON (BP and local reports) — U.S. President Barack Obama's comparison at the National Prayer Breakfast Feb. 5 in Washington, D.C., of current atrocities being committed around the world with centuries-old religious crusades and inquisitions, U.S. pre-Civil War slavery, and Jim Crow segregation has been met with criticism from Southern Baptist leaders and others.

"Humanity has been grappling with these questions throughout human history," Obama said, "and lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ."

"In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ."

Southern Baptist Convention President Ronnie Floyd, senior pastor of Cross Church in northwestern Arkansas, attended the breakfast and expressed concern.

"His flawed comparison to atrocities that happened hundreds of years ago minimizes the severity of ISIS and other groups that are brutalizing and killing innocent people," Floyd told Baptist Press. "Instead of focusing on the past, America needs heroic leadership in the present — leadership that champions religious liberty for all people."

Russell Moore, president of Southern Baptists' Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission in Nashville, wrote in a statement to Baptist Press, "President Obama is right that many

"His flawed comparison to atrocities that happened hundreds of years ago minimizes the severity of ISIS and other groups that are brutalizing and killing innocent people. Instead of focusing on the past, America needs heroic leadership in the present — leadership that champions religious liberty for all people."

Ronnie Floyd
Southern Baptist
Convention President

wicked things were done in the name of Christ. This is an unfair and unfortunate moral comparison, though, in light of the threat of ISIS.

"The dissenters from these non-Christian deeds prevailed, precisely because a Christian moral ethic was on their side."

"I have my own theory," said Chuck Todd, host of NBC's Meet the Press, on last Sunday's show. "He's not a big fan of the Prayer Breakfast, I think, and I think he almost enjoys creating a rhetorical debate."

Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., told Baptist Press that the president's comments

"seem to say that he is more worried about possible feelings of Islamophobia from American Christians than the grotesquely brutal religious cleansing against their brethren that is actually taking place by jihadists in various countries."

"Shea served seven terms on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom."

ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, has committed sectarian violence against Christians, Yazidis, and Shi'ite Muslims, forcing nearly two million Iraqis to flee their homes, the U.N. Security Council has reported, and putting ISIS violence on par with war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Specifically, the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child said it has received reports of "several cases of mass executions of boys, as well as reports of beheadings, crucifixions of children, and burying children alive," CNN reported Feb. 5.

Oklahoma Republican U.S. Senator James Lankford, who was director of student ministry at the Baptist Convention of Oklahoma from 1995-2009, said on FOX's Lou Dobbs' business report that Obama needs to concentrate on the present.

"The real issue is what's happening right now," Lankford said, "and while we can look back on history and find lots of issues in history, you don't find Christians around the world beheading. You don't find Buddhists around the world beheading. You don't find Hindus around the world beheading and setting people on fire. You find that right now among Islamic radicals."